

LAKOTA STAR QUILTS

A long time ago, Feather Woman fell in love. Her love was Morning Star, son of Moon and Sun. Feather Woman went with Morning Star to live in Star Country. Eventually, she had a fine son of her own called Star Boy. Her joy was complete. She had everything she needed in Star Country. But she was told, "do not eat a turnip."

One day, she missed the taste of turnip. She wandered through Star Country and finally found one. She dug and dug, until she made a big hole. Through it, she saw her Earth Country home again. She missed it, too. She wrapped her sweet son in a white buffalo blanket and braided the fresh green tops of the turnip into a long rope that could take her back home. Sadly, Feather Woman fell off the braided turnip tops and died on her journey home. Star Boy, a child of stars and earth, was left an orphan.

As he grew older, he taught the ways of generosity and honor to the Lakota people of his earth home. Each day, he greeted his father with a prayer, "Morning Star, there at the place where the sun comes up, you who have the wisdom which we seek, help us in cleansing ourselves and all the people, that our generations to come will have light as they walk the sacred path..."

In the northern plains of the United States—what is now North Dakota, South Dakota, and Minnesota—the Lakota people are proud of their quilts, especially their morning star quilts, or *wičháŋpi owíŋža*.

In the past, Lakota decorated ceremonial buffalo hide robes with an eight-pointed star. To them, this special star looked like the circles of eagle feather bonnets, the rays of the sun, and the morning star. Originally, tribal elders draped hides around the shoulders of braves and hunters when they returned from battle or a successful hunt. Sometimes young men would wrap themselves in ceremonial hides on their vision quests.

As white settlers overhunted buffalo herds making herds smaller, textiles brought by missionaries replaced hides in Lakota quilting. While their mothers and grandmothers were taught by the missionaries, the young girls were introduced to sewing and quilt making at boarding schools. When sewing machines were created, Lakota people made more and more quilts. Some quilters today make thousands of quilts. By the 1900s, quilting had become a major part of Lakota life. Elders usually teach the art of quilt making at home.

In making the morning star quilt, small diamonds in eight sections are joined together to form an eight-point star. The eight points symbolize infancy, youth, maturity, and old age—the four stages of life. They also suggest the four compass directions—north, south, east, and west. The quilt patches themselves stand for loved ones and heroes, living and passed on. One Oglala Lakota quilting artist says, "looking at the stacks of fabric is like looking at a rainbow. There are hundreds of tones in each hue, just like people."

Most Lakota star quilts have a solitary star; however, some quilters create multiple or broken star patterns. Morning star quilts are among the most valued gifts. They must be respected and

protected by being either displayed or draped. Most morning star quilts are the sizes of coverlets or small comforters that wrap the receiver.

Honor and generosity are woven into Lakota life and Lakota quilts. Across the Plains, they are central to the summer powwow season in the Giveaway ceremony. Giveaways begin with the family circling the arena with a pile of gifts topped with a dozen star quilts. The announcer calls a person's name over the public address system. As they come forward, a tribal elder wraps the star quilt around their shoulders. It is an honor to receive a star quilt, but it is a greater honor to give one away.

In addition to powwows, the tribal community celebrates births, weddings, naming ceremonies, graduations, funerals, and even basketball tournaments with star quilts. These celebrations are honored by public Giveaway ceremonies. Lakota people spend months making or ordering star quilts for a Giveaway. Families can give as many as fifteen quilts at one event.

For quilt makers like Patricia Stuen, the morning star quilt connects the giver and the receiver to their origins. We come from the stars, she says. "The morning star leads us back."

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